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Brands plucked out of the Fire.

A SERMON

PREACHED BY

THE DEAN OF WESTMINSTER

BEFORE THE

CHURCH PENITENTIARY ASSOCIATION

AT ST. JAMES'S CHURCH, PICCADILLY

ON

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S E R M O N.

Z E C H A R I A H, iii. 2.

“Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?”

IN nothing does the Church of Christ so plainly vindicate her true character and mission, in nothing does she affirm so clearly that she is a divine institution, and not a merely human, as in bold assaults upon the kingdom of Satan; challenging the adversary on his own ground—not timidly content if only she can shield and shelter from his malice and his wiles those who have always continued with her, but winning back from his dominion those whom for a while she has lost, and he had won; daring the strong man in his own stronghold, and, in the strength of a Stronger yet, taking from him his armour in which he trusted, and dividing his goods. To the question, “Is the Lord among us or no?” the true answer must be ever, not in word, but in deed. He is among us, if we are doing mighty acts, which only can be done through Him, through His presence, and in His power. A character of daring will ever mark a Church in which the Spirit of Christ effectually dwells. To go upon forlorn hopes, to believe everything possible,—that mountains can become plains, that lost can be found, and lame can walk, and lepers be cleansed, that dry bones can live, and brands half consumed be plucked from the fire, that clods of earth may be transmuted into stars of heaven, that Sauls may be transformed

into Pauls, persecutors of the faith into preachers of the faith, beggars taken out of the mire and set among princes, women that *were* sinners be changed into women that *shall be* saints; to believe all this, and to embody this belief in acts, in acts of faith and love, "believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things," this is the true glory of the Church. Thus, in such acts of holy daring, she avouches her conviction that she indeed wields powers of the world to come, dispenses sacraments of heaven, that His name whom she preaches, through faith in His name, is able to make the weak strong, and the sick whole, and the dead alive; that as nothing is impossible to Him, so nothing ought to be impossible to that Church which represents Him, and carries on His work in the world.

It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that out of every revival of faith and love in the Church, there has risen up a stronger and more earnest sympathy, a more inward bleeding compassion than before, for those who, among the lost, seem the *most* lost, the furthest removed of all from the healing powers of that Gospel, the most inextricably entangled of all in the net of hell; I mean that unhappy class whose sins and whose sorrows, whose guilt and whose misery, have brought us together to-day. The Church has, indeed, always recognised in some sort her duty to these; she can never forget what her mission and commission is — even to seek and save that which is lost. But she has recognised this duty faintly and feebly in times past; and even after all that has been done during these last few years, for which we thank God, it must be owned that she recognises it faintly and feebly still. At the same time your presence here, the work which many among you, with so many others absent from us in body but not in spirit to-day, are carrying forward through the land, is a testimony that our duty in this matter is more fully admitted than it has been; and I shall not, therefore, occupy your time in pressing upon you a task which you have already undertaken, but suggest a few thoughts whereby we may, if God shall bless the word, quicken, strengthen, deepen in ourselves, and it may be in others, a sense of the obligation which lies upon us, Christian men and Christian women, to do more than yet we have done for seeking those strayed, and saving those lost. Nor shall I omit to suggest some of the encouragements which we may find in this work.

First, then, let me observe, that to my mind nothing can strike more strongly one who thoughtfully meditates on the moral phenomena which society presents, than the very dif-

ferent, the very unequal distribution of the penalties which wait upon unchastity in one sex and the other — so far, at least, as this present life is concerned. How lightly they descend upon one sex; how heavily, with what a crushing weight, upon the other. *He* forgets the promise of his baptism, namely, that he would flee from youthful lusts, that he would yield his members instruments of righteousness unto God. He forgets this; he yields them instruments of unrighteousness unto sin; and what is the penalty which *he* pays? There may be, there surely will be, deep scars upon his conscience; wounds which, after long seeming closed, will open afresh; haunting memories of evil; but I am not speaking of these, nor yet of that day when all things done in the body, all unrepented and therefore unforgiven sins, shall have to be answered in the body; nor am I even speaking of his position as it would be in the Church, supposing any discipline were there exercised at all; but, as matters now stand, it is free to him at any moment, if only he will break off these evil courses, to have all which has been done forgotten by the world, a general act of oblivion past in regard of it; and his profligacy must have been very extreme and very unusual indeed, if more is said about him than that he was a little wild in time past, or if in any way his prospects or permanent position in the esteem and good opinion of men is affected by the sins which he has committed.

Thus is it with *him*; but how with *her*? She too falls; but is the rising again so easy for her? Alas! no. The weakness or guilt, and ah! sometimes the ignorance, of a moment, is the misery of a life. For her one might almost say, “*vestigia nulla retrorsum.*” What is condoned in him so easily, is not condoned in her at all. There seems but one way henceforth before her, and that is the downward way, leading ever further and further from God, nearer and nearer to the pit.

Now, my brethren, when I speak thus, I would not for an instant imply that it is not most just that this sin of unchastity should be visited with heavier penalties in the woman than in the man,—with heavier penalties so far as this present world is concerned. I believe that it is most just; and when some would account for this fact on the ground that it is man who mainly forms the public opinion, and that he has unfairly formed it in his own favour, this explanation, I am persuaded, is as shallow as it is untrue. This heavier penalty is of God’s and not of man’s ordaining.

It was He who gave to the woman the guardianship of the

sanctities of the home, of the family life, of the inviolate hearth. The mart, the forum, the altar, the unconquered forest, the wild ocean, the stormy battle-field, these are man's. But the home, and the special guardianship of that virtue which alone makes the home possible, this is the woman's. This trust was committed to her charge; the sceptre of this august dominion was placed in her hands—a trust most glorious when fulfilled; most fearful, most terrible, when betrayed; and as the glory, the dignity, the blessedness of the fulfilment, so the shame, the dishonour, the misery of the betrayal. We express all this, when we call a woman's chastity her *virtue*. It is a deep and true instinct which leads us to give it this name. It is her virtue; it is the centre, the moral citadel of her whole life and being. And not man, but God, has said that the sin of this virtue lost, should draw after it a direr penalty for her than for him.

But with all this, the *enormous* disproportion between the penalties of this sin of unchastity in the onesex and in the other, the very different balances in which these are weighed out, cannot but strike us deeply; it cannot but lay heavy bonds, and impose strong obligations on that sex, which, so far as this world is concerned, has by so much the lighter portion of the burden, though it has often the heavier portion of the guilt. And these obligations, what are they? They are obligations to mitigate, so far as this is possible, the terrible severity of the woman's punishment—that it may not reach body and soul alike—that if fame and name and almost everything which is the ornament of this present life are gone, and so gone that only a few shattered fragments of them can ever be recovered again, still that with these the hope of heaven, of peace with God, of a place among his pardoned ones, should not likewise disappear.

And these obligations to diminish, so far as this may be done, the overwhelming severity of this doom, lie, as it seems to me, upon all men, ought to be acknowledged and admitted by all. Thus, there are those who, it may be under the sheltering influences of a religious home, in the strength of their baptismal grace, and of the daily increments of that grace received through prayer; those who, by the fear of God, and by the love of God, have been kept in their youth from the pollutions which are in the world through lust; have passed unscathed through those fires in which so many are scorched, even though they be not quite consumed. Whatever blots their youth may have had, it had not this, which for so many is the darkest blot among all. Is there not here matter

for them of everlasting thanksgiving? May not this, that they were thus kept (for surely they will not say they kept themselves), claim a thank-offering at their hands? And what shape should such a thank-offering more suitably assume than that of some labour of love, some offering of gratitude for the setting forward such purposes as those which this Association has at heart?

Some again (it may be that such is here present to-day) have helped in time past to swell the great tide of this iniquity which is now rising like a flood around us; alas! it may be, have helped to increase the ghastly company of those unhappy and lost ones, who now people our streets, at once our danger, our scandal, and our shame. Is there such among us this day? What amends, what reparation, can *you* make? None probably to her whom you have injured and wronged the most. She has passed out of your sight, lost amid a miserable multitude, having probably long since gone down to the chambers of death by those steep stairs of infamy, and scorn, and shame, which lead, for these wretched ones, so swiftly and inevitably there; and you two shall never meet again till that day when all shall meet, and among them the seducer and the seduced, the tempter and the tempted, the deceiver and the deceived, before the judgment seat of Christ. Does not this, if this it be, call for something from you, something very different from the ordinary contribution which good men make to a good and desirable work? Grant that you have found the atonement through the blood of the Lamb—but will you stop there? Have you found the atonement, *if* you stop there? Surely if the other rendered his thank-offering, will not you render your sin-offering, and seek, in the largeness of this, to express the largeness and depth of your repentance?

Such are the motives of justice, which may fitly move us to take an earnest share in this work of sustaining, enlarging, and multiplying penitentiaries for fallen women. And yet not motives for justice only may constrain us here, but of love, of pity, of every motive which may fitly operate on a Christian heart. Thus love to Christ may well constrain us. Now love to Christ will show itself in imitating the mind that was in Christ, in following the steps wherein Christ walked. But the whole ministry of our blessed Lord and Master was signalised by a peculiar tenderness for the lost in this kind. He who hated the sin as only the spotless and the stainless one, as only the King of saints, the immaculate Lamb of God, could do, showed everywhere his infinite pity

and compassion for the sinner. Wherever there were the faintest sparks of grace that might again be fanned into a flame, He cherished and fostered them — quenched no smoking flax, bruised no broken reed, bade the adulteress, uncondemned for the present, and with time and space for repentance, to go sin no more, cast the shield of his protection over another, whom the cruel Pharisee would have spurned from his feet, threw wide the gates of his kingdom, so that publicans and harlots entered in, while proud priests and self-righteous Pharisees were excluded. Assuredly, then, the love of Christ, if that love is at all constraining, will prompt us to take our share in this toil.

And as this love of Christ, so also pity and compassion may well prove motive powers. Surely if the measure of the misery of othersought to be the measure of our pity, those whom we here desire to aid may claim an infinite pity at our hands. There are some, indeed, who would fain persuade us that this miserable life from which we would seek to deliver them, saving them in fear, snatching them as brands from the fire, is no such miserable life after all ; and we must most of us have seen, and having seen, can scarcely forget, that evil letter which, by some strange oversight and inconsistency, found its way into our principal journal ; and which, professing to be written by a prosperous member of this guilty company, but betraying in every line the hand of a man, set forth at large, and in attractive colours, the advantages which the occupation offered, the opportunities for self-culture which it afforded, the many virtues which it gave its votaries the room for displaying.

Believe nothing of the kind ; when you have believed the worst which your imagination can devise of the wretchedness and degradation which such a life must draw after it, be sure that the picture which you have drawn, falls infinitely short of the terrible reality. Oh ! if it were possible to look into the heart of one of those unhappy ones whom we hurry past in the streets with a momentary shudder, and then perhaps think of no more, as we hasten to that sheltered home, where wife and daughter, and the happy innocent children, are gathered round the holy hearth ; oh ! if we could look into that bosom, what a revelation would be there ! What unutterable loathing of self ! what fierce indignation against others ! what a dark empty heaven above ! what a dreary desolate earth around ! what depths of despair within, deeper than any plummet-line of our anguish has ever sounded ! what gnawings that have already commenced of the undying worm !

the present loathsome and hideous — the past more dreadful yet, for it shows like a Paradise for ever lost, wherein she too once walked in paths of innocence and peace, which she can never walk in again—a Paradise lost and haunted, it may be, by the memories of a mother's anguished love, of a father's broken heart. Such the present and the past; and for the future, blackness of darkness in this life,—and beyond this life,—but what need of another place of torment? "Myself am hell;" these awful words, which our great poet put into the mouth of the chief among the fallen Spirits, and which never could be *perfectly* true of any other, how very nearly may they find their fulfilment in one and another of those lost sisters whom we, sometimes without one pitying thought, hurry past in our streets!

And the outer of their lives, in its want and woe, its desolation and wretchedness, is only too sure a reflex and counterpart of the inner. Sooner or later the world turns round upon all its votaries, upon all who have yielded themselves to its service and the service of sin, rather than to the service of God: sooner or later it rejects them with loathing, as the sea rejects after a while the corpses which itself has swallowed up. All servants of evil are sooner or later cast off by that master whom they have served, but none so soon as these; in none is the degradation so rapid; for none is the paint and gilding upon the surface of a sinful life stripped off so completely and so soon; for none is the little honey at the brim exchanged so quickly for the much gall in the cup; by none are the swine's husks so quickly reached; for none is the downward path so strangely swift, so terrible, or to such a bottomless abyss of woe. It is calculated, by those who have studied the matter, that the career of one of these unhappy ones seldom is prolonged beyond three or four years at the most; that by this time, disease and exposure, and the canker of a corroding misery within, with the vain attempt to dull and deaden the anguish of this by stimulants from without, will have done their work, and that in this brief period a whole generation of these, the most unfitted of all to die, have died, and another sinful generation succeeded in their room.

Seeing, then, that he, the murderer from the beginning, is gathering in so fast his harvests of death, of death natural and death eternal, it behoves those to be up and doing, who could by any means save some, and gather some into the garners of heaven. Nor is this endeavour at all such a forlorn hope as I spoke of just now. Many have been saved; pulled out of the fire. Many more

might have been saved, if there had been the love and faith to make the attempt. Indeed, I know no sadder page in the whole history of the Church's work in this direction, than the fact that one of our chief Penitentiaries, during about 40 years of its existence, admitting 2747 applicants, was obliged to reject, in other words, to bid return to their sinful courses, nearly twice as many more. Oh! let us not now by our niggard charity shut the door of hope upon any. There is much to be done. Experience has taught us that we need two different kinds of foundations effectually to carry on this work; we need the Penitentiary, and the House of Refuge: the House of Refuge as near as possible to the very haunts of sin, with its door always open, so that the happy moment may be seized at once; the blessed thought, "I will arise and go to my Father," may at once embody itself in act; and then behind this the Penitentiary, whither those that have found temporary shelter in the Refuge, may be presently drafted off; and where all that restorative discipline of grace and healing which exists in Christ's Church may be brought to bear upon their souls; where too they may find that which is above all price, even the free service of love, in the devotion of Christian women, who count it their noblest task to help in raising up the fallen, in restoring the true womanhood in those their sisters, from whom it might have seemed utterly, and for ever, trampled out and effaced. A difficult task no doubt; and yet, as all who have tried know, neither a hopeless nor a thankless toil. Wonderful are those restorative powers of which I reminded you but now. Who is there that has had anything to do with these poor outcasts but has marked how soon, when they have returned even but a little to the ways of penitence and prayer, the very fashion of their countenance has altered; the signs of effrontery and debauch, stamped so visibly there, which they brought with them, have disappeared, and the true lineaments of the "human face divine" have come forth again? And this outward change is but the utterance and expression of an inward. For not in old times only, but in our own as well, where sin has abounded, grace has abounded much more. We do not merely *read* of the Mary Magdalens, the Maries of Egypt, the Lavallières, monuments of the grace of God; but we too *see* our tokens; brands plucked out of the fire; wanderers brought home, given back to themselves, to their friends, to their God; yea, sometimes, so wonderful are God's dealings in His Church, so free His grace, those that had lain among the pots, to whom are given

the wings of a dove, that is covered with silver wings, and her feathers like gold.

To strengthen and encourage ourselves, and one another, in this blessed work by common prayer; by a word of exhortation; by oblations of a free heart; above all, by fellowship in the blessed Body and Blood of the Crucified for our sins and the Risen again for our justification; it is for this that we are assembled to-day. May He prosper the work of our hands! May His grace and spirit be with us now and for evermore!

THE END.

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